It is a familiar story.

Angela is staying in an all-girls dormitory at a public university that has just let out for break. For whatever reason, she is unable to go home like the other students. She shares the dorm with only two other individuals: a stern headmistress named Mary and a lonely and eccentric janitor.

With nothing else to pass the time, Angela leaves her room and ascends to a quiet corner of the fourth floor to play the piano. As she settles onto the bench and begins to play, she is unaware that the janitor has crept up behind her. Leaving her no time to scream, he attacks—perpetrating unspeakable acts upon her body with a knife or an axe before running off to parts unknown.

With her last ounce of strength, Angela drags herself to the headmistress' room for help. Mary, however, has locked the door and gone to sleep. She is unable to hear the student's scratches and garbled pleas. The next morning, Mary opens her door to find Angela dead in the hallway with her fingernails embedded in the wood. Stricken with grief, Mary loses her mind and spends the rest of her tortured life in a state hospital.

This is one variation of a story known to folklorists as "the roommate's death." First written down by Linda Dégh in her essay "The Roommate's Death and Related Dormitory Stories in Formation" in *Indiana Folklore* 2 (1969), she had heard it from a student at Indiana University who had been told the story as a freshman in 1964. In the original version, the killing took place in a sorority house, and it was the victim's roommates who discovered her body. Todd Webb, in *Too Good to Be True* by Jan Harold Brunvand, wrote that he first heard the story while he was an undergrad in Georgia in 1983. The incident, interestingly, was alleged to have occurred at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana.

The story is told, Brunvand explained, "as a warning to freshmen by upperclass students or by resident advisors in the dormitories."[1] It is a story that feeds on the fears of college-bound women all over the country.

Thanks to unabating interest, the version of "the roommate's death" told at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston has taken on a life of its own. The victim and the victim's unfortunate guardian have both transcended their ordeal and now haunt the hall as ghosts. Over the years, an old plaque dedicated to one of the first directors of Pemberton Hall, a popular urban legend, and a touch of wishful thinking have combined to create one of the most enduring oral traditions in east-central Illinois. The story itself is incredible, but in this case, the truth behind it is almost stranger than fiction.

Pemberton Hall is the oldest all-female dormitory in the state of Illinois and was the brainchild of Livingston C. Lord, president of Eastern Illinois State Normal School (as EIU was called at the time) from 1899 to 1933. In 1901, President Lord went before the Appropriations Committee of the Illinois state legislature and asked for $60,000 to build a woman's dormitory on campus. The committee denied the funding after telling the staunchly nonpartisan Lord that he "had

[1] Jan Harold Brunvand, *Too Good to Be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, 2001), 433-4.

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made a fairly good joke."[2] One senator, Stanton C. Pemberton, took the idea seriously and began to lobby on President Lord's behalf.

Finally, in 1907, President Lord and Senator Pemberton plied $100,000 out of the legislature for both a dorm and an accompanying gymnasium. Two years later, as the construction neared its final stages, the state Appropriation's Committee added $3,000 to finish the basement and the attic. The completed hall, named after Senator Pemberton, housed up to 100 women and officially opened on January 4, 1909. Miss Estelle Gross became the first headmistress, but only served in the position for a year before being succeeded by the now infamous Mary E. Hawkins.[3] Senator Pemberton was enamored with the new dorm, which he said possessed "a fine high-sounding name." President Lord was also proud of the building and once remarked, "I never go by in the evening when the girls are in their rooms and the lights [are on] in all the windows without feeling anew the satisfaction of it."[4]

[2] *Eastern News* (Charleston) 22 October 1965.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Charles H. Coleman, *Eastern Illinois State College: Fifty Years of Public Service* in *Eastern Illinois State College Bulletin* 189 (January 1950): 123; Isabel McKinney, *Mr. Lord: The Life and Words of Livingston C. Lord* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1937), 237-238.

The old-English look and feel of the dormitory was well suited for its first full time matron, Mary Hawkins, who had emigrated from Great Britain in 1901 and possessed all the stoic air of an Edwardian Englishwoman. She was a pleasant looking woman with curly, dark hair that she pinned up in the fashion of her day.[5] Born in 1877, Miss Hawkins assumed the position of dorm director in August 1910 when she was 33 years old. "As head of Pemberton Hall," she once wrote, "[the residents] are under my control entirely."[6] She had no patience for libertine college life and imposed strict rules on 'her girls,' which included a 7:30pm curfew and 10:30pm bedtime. Church was the only place coeds were able to go unchaperoned.

Mary Hawkins left her position at Pemberton Hall in March 1917 and died at the age of 41 on the night of October 29, 1918 at the Kankakee State Mental Hospital in the shadow of the influenza epidemic and the end of the First World War. Hospital orderlies discovered her body at 5am the next day. Her obituary read: "she was a woman of education and refinement and a most efficient person in the position she occupied. Very seldom, indeed, does one find in the same individual good business ability, a most excellent housekeeper, and a fine influence over young women."[7] Her death certificate listed the cause of death as 'general paralysis of the insane,' otherwise known as general paresis, a condition of motor paralysis and softening of the brain.[8] General paresis occurs as a result of late-term, or tertiary, syphilis, which sets in a decade or more after infection and triggers abnormal eye reflexes, dementia, dramatic mood swings, and even seizures. Two years after Mary's death, the university hung a bronze tablet near the entrance commemorating her service. The tablet remains there to this day.

It is unclear exactly when urban legend and historical fact merged to create the unique tale of the ghost of Mary Hawkins. Storytellers cannot even agree on which character the name of Mary belongs to—the murdered coed or the distraught dorm mother. Sometimes Mary manifests herself as a prankster; a young

[5] Troy Taylor's description of her as having long blond hair is inaccurate, not to mention anachronistic. See: *The '13 W'apper* (Charleston: Eastern Illinois State Normal School, 1913), 16.

[6] *Eastern News* (Charleston) 19 April 1967.

[7] *Daily Courier* (Charleston) 31 October 1918.

[8] Margaret Allen-Kline, "'She Protects Her Girls': The Legend of Mary Hawkins at Pemberton Hall" (M.A. thesis, Eastern Illinois University, 1998), 6.

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woman who scratches at doors, leaves footprints, or wanders up to the fourth floor dressed in nothing but a white gown. Other times Mary is a benevolent matriarch who makes sure doors are locked at night and warns her girls of trouble. Some writers have attempted to clear up the confusion by suggesting that two ghosts may be at work; one of the unfortunate victim and the other of Mary Hawkins, who has come back from the dead to watch over her girls as she once did in life.[9]

The earliest article I found concerning the Pemberton Hall legend was written by Karen Knupp in October 1976 for the *Eastern News*. Karen explained that the story, having been told for "years and years," was handed down from veteran Pem Hall residents to incoming freshmen through an oral tradition that even included using the story as a topic in their speech classes. Some of the eerie proceedings she chronicled included a girl who saw a light emanating from one of the windows on the fourth floor, a Resident Assistant who found that the lounge furniture rearranged itself, and a strange encounter with a girl wearing a white gown who went around asking for safety pins before she disappeared. Karen noted that some residents had celebrated their unique heritage by holding a "Mary Hawkins Day" the previous spring.[10]

In November of the same year, Karen wrote a follow up article after a 1921 resident of Pemberton Hall named Stella (Craft) Temple contacted her and told her that she knew the origins of the ghost story. Mrs. Temple explained that a coed named Uterpa Sharps, a thirty-year-old student with an interest in hypnotism, liked to scare the younger girls by jumping out of the janitor's closet. Mrs. Temple, who if she had actually lived there in 1921 could not have known Mary Hawkins (who would have been deceased at that time), claimed that, "no one would tell Miss Hawkins. She wouldn't have any monkey business like that. She was English and very strict." If it was true she knew Mary Hawkins, then the events featuring Uterpa Sharps must have taken place before 1917. At any rate, she suggested that Uterpa's strange behavior was the origin of the legend, not a murder.[11]

After some investigation, I discovered that Euterpe Sharp (as her name was actually spelled) graduated from Eastern in 1919. Euterpe served as illustrator for the 1919 Eastern yearbook, the *Warbler*, and also participated in making crafts for a visiting third grade class in December. Her senior quote was "it is better to wear out than to rust out."[12] Oddly enough, I found no mention of Estella (as her name was actually spelled) Craft in 1919, 1920, or 1921. She was, however, listed among the senior class in 1922.[13] That means, if these events are to be believed at all, that Estella must have been a freshman when Euterpe was a senior. Regardless, she could not have gone to Eastern when Mary Hawkins served as dorm mother, and it is likely that her recollections of Mary were passed down to her from other residents.

Because Mary departed Eastern during the First World War, most storytellers allege the murder occurred around that time. Some have used the sporadic publication of the school's newspaper, which actually had to do with war rationing, as proof of a conspiracy to

[9] *Eastern News* (Charleston) 25 October 1979.

[10] *Eastern News* (Charleston) 15 October 1976.

[11] *Eastern News* (Charleston) 5 November 1976.

[12] *The Warbler*, vol. 1, (Charleston: Eastern Illinois State Normal School, 1919), 8-9, 32, 64.

[13] *The Warbler*, vol. 4, (Charleston: Eastern Illinois State Normal School, 1922), 29.

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cover up the murder. The details of when either Mary or the coed met their unfortunate end have changed periodically. There exists a general consensus that it took place over winter break, but an October 1984 *Daily Eastern News* article written by Diane Schneidman suggested May as the month the murder occurred, and an article published in 1982 claimed it transpired during Spring Break.[14] Jo-Anne Christensen, in her book *Ghost Stories of Illinois*, depicted the crime being committed during a furious thunderstorm, which also suggests springtime. The *National Directory of Haunted Places*, written by Dennis William Hauck, challenged all of those accounts by changing the year of the murder to 1920, long after the real Mary Hawkins was deceased.[15]

The details of the incident, including why and how Mary or the girl was killed, where they stayed in Pemberton, and even who killed them, have also changed over the years, and the accounts have become quite inventive. Diane Schneidman, for example, wrote that the homicidal janitor's wife had died, implying that grief and desperation drove him to murder. Some writers, such as *Daily Eastern News* staff writer Jennifer Lavery, have weaved other historical events into the narrative. Not realizing that Mary Hawkins had no relatives living in the United States, Jennifer believed that a John Hawkins, who appeared in the Coles County court records in May 1917, had gone to trial for the murder of his "sister" Mary. "I think I finally found some truth to this supposed rumor," she wrote.[16]

During one of the notorious haunted houses held in Pemberton Hall, the guide told visitors that Mary's room had been number 308. One student attending that particular event told the *Daily Eastern News* reporters that Mary had been having an affair with a married professor before she was killed.[17] The murder weapon, though usually consistent, has changed as well. With a variety any fan of the game Clue would appreciate, it has been alternatively described as an axe, a blunt object, bare hands, and even piano wire.

In 1984, William M. Michael, a writer for the Decatur *Herald and Review*, spent the night in the fourth floor piano room. Needless to say, he reported no encounters with a ghost. But for every tale of disappointment, there is

one that seems to confirm that something strange is taking place inside the ninety-nine year old walls. The same day that Michael's article was printed, a story appeared alongside it that recounted one woman's experience with the ghost. Patty O'Neill, also a writer for the *Herald and Review*, lived in Pemberton Hall for three years and claimed that she had awoken one night in the spring of 1981 to see a young woman dressed in a nightgown standing beside her bed. Thinking it was her roommate, she tried to ask the girl what was wrong, but the intruder turned around and walked away without a reply.[18] Patty's eerie tale was reprinted in Beth Scott and Michael Norman's book *Haunted America*, which launched the story of Mary Hawkin's ghost to national fame.

[14] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 26 October 1984; *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 29 October 1982.

[15] Jo-Anne Christensen, *Ghost Stories of Illinois* (Edmonton: Lone Pine Publishing, 2000), 189; Dennis William Hauck, *The National Directory of Haunted Places: Ghostly Abodes, Sacred Sites, UFO Landings, and Other Supernatural Locations* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994, 1996), 153.

[16] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 2 November 1989.

[17] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 31 October 1997.

[18] *Herald and Review* (Decatur) 25 October 1984; see also: Allen-Kline, 54.

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Another bizarre incident occurred in 1984 when one Pemberton Hall resident discovered small, black footprints that appeared on the floor of her room. "They seemed to be the prints of someone tip-toeing across the room, and the prints proved impossible to remove," assistant editor Michelle Mueller wrote in the Verge section of the *Daily Eastern News*. "The prints led from the door to the closet and back out to the door."[19] Other experiences included doors locking and unlocking, furniture moving by itself, electronic disturbances, and the faint sounds of footsteps or a piano playing on the fourth floor. One former resident director even claimed that her fiancé felt someone smack him on the rear end even though she was on the other side of the room.[20]

Kelly Bryan, a Pem Hall resident in 2002 and 2004, told me that she never experienced anything unusual while living there and didn't believe in the story, although she noted that the basement always gave her the creeps. "From what I've read, I just don't think it has much basis in reality," she said. "If you really believe in it, you're more likely to blame things on the ghost."[21]

Over the years, Pemberton Hall has opened its doors, as well as its notorious fourth floor, around Halloween in an effort to raise money and entertain students with the story. According to an article by Bob Glover in the *Daily Eastern News*, the tradition of turning Pem Hall into a haunted house began in 1978. "The stories that have haunted Pemberton Hall and the secrets of the fourth floor will finally be available for public scrutiny," Glover wrote. "On Saturday, the one and only fourth floor will be opened for the first time in many, many years."[22] The event was repeated the next year for a small fifty-cent fee. Apparently the experience wasn't well received, since the Resident Housing Association haunted house was moved to an abandoned residence on Seventh Street in 1983. "The act will be more convincing than the usual RHA haunted house at Pemberton Hall," the project chairman commented in an article about the move.[23] The haunted house did add its own contribution to the legend, however, when drops of fake blood were left on the floor and the piano keys, giving a chill to anyone who was lucky enough to venture up there. Pemberton Hall resumed its haunted house in 1997, complete with an actress playing the X-Files theme on the fourth floor piano and a man in a black robe who told the story to the groups of bemused college students.[24] The Pemberton Hall Council opened the dorm once again in 2001, although the haunted house was strictly confined to its lower levels. Because of safety concerns, visitors were only allowed to "peek" at the mysterious fourth floor.[25]

Social commentary has inevitably crept its way into the telling of the Mary Hawkins story, most often in the form of brief snipes at Mary's "strict rules." Margaret Allen-Kline, in her Masters thesis on the tale, went one step farther, speculating that "there are warnings

[19] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 25 October 1985.

[20] Allen-Kline, 74.

[21] Kelly Bryan, interview by author, September 2006, Charleston.

[22] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 27 October 1978.

[23] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 28 October 1983.

[24] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 31 October 1997.

[25] *Daily Eastern News* (Charleston) 31 October 2001.

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within these stories, warnings regarding consequences for women who go against established gender roles, women who allow themselves to remain unprotected, isolated from society or community."[26] The story of Mary Hawkins has, occasionally, fitted neatly into a narrative wherein her ghostly manifestations are the result of a battle between the draconian rules of the turn of the century and the libertine college life of our contemporary era. The idea that Mary's stringent rules were an engine of gender oppression, however, is as much a part of the myth as the ghost stories themselves.

While conservative by today's standards, the college and university of Mary Hawkins' time was a progressive institution in which mainstream Protestant values coexisted with modern science. The entire campus, not just the women's dorm, was administrated like a military camp. Along with its basic courses, education was designed to teach students conformity to rules, self-discipline, and self-restraint; values that, as Mary's own unfortunate death illustrates, were sometimes difficult to live up to.

It is easy for someone living today to paint the period with a wide brush, but not everyone at the time had the same opinion in regards to gender relations. Livingston C. Lord, for instance, had no patience for conservative evangelicalism, and in 1909, when a student at Eastern joined a local preacher in condemning the dances held on campus, President Lord thought of him as a "hypocrite" and a "sneak and a liar" who "was talking filth about the girls." Some of the young man's fellow students even tossed him into the campus pond. During the course of another series of evangelical revivals in the community, President Lord took a female student aside and told her, "Don't let anyone tell you you are bad or wicked—because you are not."[27]

As Pemberton Hall celebrates its 100-year anniversary, interest in the legend of Mary Hawkins seems unabated. Its inclusion in books on Illinois ghost stories has become obligatory, and a steady rotation of students arriving each year at Eastern Illinois University guarantees that the story will be passed down from one generation to the next. For the young women of Pemberton Hall, the spirit of Mary Hawkins will always be there with them; watching, protecting, and playing pranks. ■

[26] Allen-Kline, 34.

[27] McKinney, 238-240.

About the Author

Michael Kleen earned a master's degree in American history from Eastern Illinois University in 2008. He is the author of numerous books, including *Tales of Coles County, Illinois*, *Six Tales of Terror*, *A Short History of Ashmore Estates*, and has written several articles for *Paranormal Underground* magazine.

Michael has also spoken on local history and folklore at Teapot's Café in Beecher, Illinois, Ashmore Estates, Charleston Middle School, and the 2007 Conference on Illinois History in Springfield.

Michael is the publisher and executive editor of *Black Oak Presents*, a quarterly digital journal of Middle American art and culture, and the proprietor of Black Oak Press, Illinois and Black Oak Media.

He also authors the *Legends and Lore of Illinois*, a monthly electronic serial regarding some of Illinois most famous and obscure objects of folklore and ghost lore. Below are some websites where you can check out Michael's writing.

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